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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature using the word "crisis" in relation to current higher education and analyzes claims of three specific crises of the past 25 years. It considers reasons why educational institutions may be particularly vulnerable to claims of crisis and offers some ideas about the nature of higher education crises and the purposes they serve. Analysis of the literature suggests that institutional crises in higher education fall into four categories: (1) pandemic crises, those that are continual or appear with great frequency, e.g., finance; (2) chronic crises, those that are of moderate continuity and frequency, e.g., diversity/equity; (3) sporadic crises, e.g., student unrest; and (4) idiosyncratic crises, e.g., collective bargaining. The more detailed analysis examines the pandemic crisis of finance, the chronic crisis of confidence, and the chronic crisis of stagnation. It is suggested that the strong rhetoric of crisis is used to gain attention, power, and control of organizational and symbolic processes. The paper concludes that although there are serious problems in higher education, there are probably no more crises now than there have ever been. (Contains 97 references.) (DB)

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The Crisis Crisis in Higher Education: Is that a Wolf or a Pussycat at the Academy's Door?

Paper presented at the 23d Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Miami, Florida, 5-8 November 1998.

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held in Miami, Florida, November 5-8, 1998. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

The Crisis Crisis in Higher Education:
Is that a Wolf or a Pussycat at the Academy's Door?

> **Cri-sis** noun; plural **cri-ses**. **a.** A crucial or decisive point or situation; a turning point. **b.** An unstable condition, as in political, social, or economic affairs, involving an impending abrupt or decisive change. (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition, 1992)

If judged by the number of study groups and publications over the past five years identifying higher education as being in crisis, college and university educators today appear to be living in the most perilous of times. The National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges established a commission in 1994 to study the "**crisis** in higher education." In 1996, the Association of Governing Boards released its study of the academic presidency while warning of "a pending **crisis** in higher education unless bold steps are taken." In 1997, the Commission on National Investment in Higher Education published its report Breaking the social contract: The fiscal **crisis** in higher education. In 1998, a report of a commission sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the advancement of teaching, found the state of undergraduate education at research universities to be a "**crisis**."

At the same time, there has been a bumper crop of recent books whose titles refer explicitly to crisis, including Will teach for food: Academic labor in **crisis** (Nelson, 1997), **Crisis** in the academy (Lucas, 1996), Higher education in **crisis** (Barba, 1995), The academy in **crisis**, (Sommer, 1995), and Higher education under fire: Politics, economics and the **crisis** of the humanities (Berube & Nelson, 1995). An even larger number of journal articles, conference presentations, and newspaper stories during this same five-year period have decried, described, or advocated solutions for perceived academic crises of one or another kind.

In this study we hope to move towards a generalized understanding of the concept of "crisis" in higher education, based on an interpretive analysis of the phenomenon. The data are drawn from the titles and contents of articles, reports and presentations located through ERIC, and review of a convenience sample of both contemporary and older works on higher education. We focus on materials explicitly using the term "crisis," or words which reasonably could be considered to refer to crisis, and have ignored the voluminous material which is merely critical of higher education for one or another reason. To complement this general survey of the crisis phenomenon in higher education, we analyze claims of three specific crises over the past 25 years. Based on both the findings of the review survey, and these three analyses, we consider why educational institutions may be particularly vulnerable to crisis claims, and we offer several propositions about the nature of higher education crises and the purposes they serve.

Crises in Higher Education

> Within the past twenty or thirty years, our long-tested and successful system of collegiate instruction has ... been so persistently decried and so seriously menaced as to fill the friends of sound education throughout the country with alarm and compel them to discuss the whole theory and practice of our higher education. (Frederick Barnard, 1865 Inaugural Address, in (Caffrey, 1969, p. 9))

> Higher education in the United States and elsewhere is beset by crises: crises of public confidence, questions of continuing relevance, doubts about continuing the emphasis on doctoral instruction, and a very real financial crisis (Balderston & Weathersby, 1972, p. ii).

> The present crisis has both deeper and broader implications for the future than the repeated periods of stress facing colleges and universities since about 1970. It is a common refrain with those we have consulted to suggest that things are not going to be the same this time, or ever again (Leslie & Fretwell, 1996, p. xii).

These three statements, made in 1865, 1972 and 1996 respectively are representative of a long-standing tendency to claim that higher education is in crisis. Although they differ in language, with the word "crisis" from about 1970 onward usually substituting for the more euphemistic rhetoric of a gentler era, they are similar in suggesting that higher education is in grave difficulty, the difficulty now is far greater than in the past, and the consequences will be dire unless Something Is Done. Rivlin, looking back over twenty years of policy making, commented that "in the 1960s, the crisis in higher education related to the prospect of absorbing rapid increases in enrollment. In the 1970s, it related to the prospect of declining enrollment. At various times the crisismongers have invoked the imminent demise of some type of institution: the death of the liberal arts college, the vanishing private higher education sector, or even, believe it or not, the special plight of the research university. When all else fails, the quality of higher education can always be deplored" (Rivlin, 1988, p. 7).

What is a crisis? Kerchner and Schuster (Kerchner & Schuster, 1982, p. 122) identify the Greek origin of the word, meaning "a point of culmination and separation, an instant when change one way or another is impending." From an organizational perspective, Hermann (Hermann, 1963) considers a crisis to be something unexpected or unanticipated which threatens high-priority organizational values, and which requires a response in a restricted amount of time. We offer our own definition of higher educational crisis as a situation which threatens values critical to one or more constituencies, for which existing channels of influence and modes of rhetoric are inadequate, and which requires immediate action including the allocation of additional resources.

Higher education is integrated into the social, political and economic fabric of American society, and so it should come as no surprise that many claims of academic crisis are linked to dramatic historic events. Over the decades, presidents have identified university crises as related to the Great Depression, the loss of students at the start of World War II and the flood of new

enrollees at war's end, and the military and scientific climate caused by the Cold War (Baldridge, 1981, p. 1). The university was in crisis again during the Viet-Nam era "because society is in crisis" (Abram, 1969, p. 7). Crisis was seen in the demographic trends of the 1980s which were predicted to lead to a 15 percent enrollment decline (Breneman, 1982) and the closing of ten to thirty percent of American campuses (Keller, 1983). One educator commented at a meeting that "the word crisis has been used here 4,913 times in three days, and the predicted enrollment crisis hasn't even begun yet. You ain't seen nothin' yet, boys and girls, wait until 1995" (Baldridge, 1981, p. 3)[1] More recent crises have been related to the spread in business and government of new management systems, the culture wars, and advances in technology which will, in the words of Peter Drucker, eliminate the residential college and leave the large university campus as nothing but a "relic." (Lenzner & Johnson, 1997, p. 127).

This listing of crises related to external forces is meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive. When there is war (hot or cold), depression, social upheaval, major demographic discontinuities, or the dramatic introduction of new technology such as Sputnik or the World Wide Web, all social institutions, including higher education are affected.

Institutional Crises

Crises manifest themselves differently in different social institutions. A partial list of areas for which crises have been recently claimed in higher education include leadership (Fisher, 1997), stagnation in the face of social change (Gingrich, 1995), technology (Wood & Smellie, 1991), teaching, learning and assessment (Nettles, 1995), confidence (Leslie & Fretwell, 1996), access (National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education, 1998), curriculum (Carnochan, 1993), intercollegiate athletics ("'The crisis in intercollegiate athletics': A report by a panel of retired college presidents", 1990), accreditation (Haaland, 1995), governance (Association of Governing Boards, 1996), values (Wingspread Group, 1993), and minority enrollments (Rodriguez, 1994). Some analysts focus on the effects of the crisis on students, faculty, or individual institutions; others present an apocalyptic vision questioning the very survival of the higher education system itself (Wood & Valenzuela, 1996).

We begin our consideration of institutional crises with a brief analysis of the periodical literature of higher education during the 25 year period 1970-1994. A search of ERIC (*ERIC on CD-ROM, 1966-1979, 1980-September 1996*, 1995)using the key words "crisis" and "higher education," yielded 1,429 articles, presentations and reports. Of these, 740 were discarded because they dealt with unrelated topics such as "crisis management," "crisis counseling," or other external but non-university issues. An additional 96 were discarded because they referred to crises in countries other than the United States. The remaining 593 citations contained 797 references to specific crises. The distribution of these 797 references, sorted into 14 categories by year, is shown in Appendix 1.

To clarify some of the trends in institutional crises, we identified crises that were named in at least 5 percent of the references in each five year period from 1970 to 1994. These crises, listed by rank order based on frequency of mention, are shown in Table 1. We suggest that

institutional crises in higher education may fall into four categories: pandemic, chronic, sporadic, or idiosyncratic.

Table 1 about here

Pandemic crisis. A pandemic crisis is one which is claimed continually and with great frequency. Over the twenty-five year period, finance was the only pandemic crisis in higher education. It accounted for 27 percent of all references to crisis, and was the most frequently identified crisis in each five-year period.

Chronic crisis. A chronic crisis is one that appears with moderate continuity and frequency. We have operationalized chronic crises as being represented by at least five percent of all crisis citations for either the entire twenty-five year period, or at least three different five-year periods. There were five chronic crises, included confidence, curriculum, stagnation (our name for claims that higher education is not responsive to changing needs), diversity/equity, and leadership/governance/management[2]. Although frequency and intensity of mention was considerably below the pandemic level, chronic crises have been, and we predict will continue to be, consistent themes on the higher education policy agenda.

Sporadic crisis. There were four crises that were identified in at least five percent of the citations in only one or two of the five-year periods. These included student unrest, literacy/writing, values/morals, and enrollment. We believe these represent responses to transient social conditions and we do not expect to see them cited as major concerns in the future with any degree of frequency .

Idiosyncratic crisis. Forty-four percent of all mentions of crisis during the 25 year period were to issues categorized in Appendix 1 as "balance." We identify these as idiosyncratic because no individual crisis is identified more than five times over the twenty five years, nor more than three times in any five year period. Examples include claims of crises of accreditation, parking, or collective bargaining. These crises represent the views of small and specialized constituencies on issues seen by others as relatively unimportant.

Three Higher Education Crises

In order to examine the elements of crisis in more detail, we have developed brief analyses of claims of three different crises. They include the pandemic crisis of finance, and the chronic crises of confidence and of stagnation in the midst of rapid change.

The Pandemic Crisis of Finance

Claims of a fiscal crisis in higher education have a long and honorable tradition. Fiscal solvency was generally precarious in institutions in the nineteenth century (Jencks & Riesman, 1968, p. 6), and Henry Tappan, comparing the problems of new institutions to those of older ones

almost 150 years ago, said "we get under the same pressure of debt and make the same appeals to the public to get us out of it" (Caffrey, 1969, p. 10). More recently there have been predictions that projected enrollment growth would create a fiscal crisis (Campbell & Eckerman, 1964) that would threaten the very survival of private higher education (Abram, 1969). Fears of fiscal crisis caused by enrollment growth were succeeded shortly thereafter by fears of fiscal crisis caused by enrollment declines (Hauptman, 1993). 1969 saw an "increase in the news stories of financial crises " (Benezet, 1969, p. 15) in all sectors of higher education, and a "new depression in higher education" was declared (Cheit, 1971). By 1975, the higher education discourse of the day was "couched in terms of survival" (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1975, p. 4), and still worsening financial conditions were predicted for the future (Keller, 1983). More recently, the president of the American Council on Education declared that "higher education is in its most dire financial condition since World War II" and that things are unlikely to improve until after the year 2010 (Atwell, 1992, p. 5B). "Skyrocketing" costs, and warnings of increasing college costs "beyond the average family's ability to pay" (Cox, 1964, p. 3) are regularly reiterated (Lenning, 1974) and repeated again in 1996 with claims that "if appropriate steps are not taken, higher education could become so expensive that millions of students will be denied access" (National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education, 1998).

What are we to make of all this? Are college costs rising faster than family income or inflation (National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education, 1998)? Nonsense, says an economist: "That view is based on irrelevant data and faulty statistical methodologies" (Doti, 1998, p. B7). Is "American higher education a bargain" as stated in the draft report of a national commission (Burd, 1997a, p. A33), or must colleges "take more seriously public concern over rising costs" as stated in the final version revised after political pressure? (Burd, 1997b, p. A31). Are colleges charging too much? A majority of the public believes college is worth its cost ("Public attitudes about paying for college", 1998, p. A39). Do costs go up because colleges are providing more services desired by their "customers" and improving their quality (O'Keefe 1987), because higher education is labor intensive and thus unable to use technology to the degree seen in industry, or because the self-serving goals of insensitive faculty and administrators create inefficiency as well as ineffectiveness? There are no agreed-on answers to these questions.

The fiscal crisis claims of today seem remarkably like those of yesterday. Concerns that colleges and universities are in danger of failing are clearly misplaced[3], and claims that we are pricing ourselves out of the market are patently false. Total higher education enrollment is increasing, applications to expensive institutions also known for their quality are not declining, and low cost alternatives are available for almost anyone. Reflecting in 1969 on the apparent discrepancies between crisis claims on one hand and successful functioning on the other, Howard Bowen put the situation in context:

> I agree that financial problems loom ahead, and that new financial solutions are called for. I think that 'crisis' is not the apt word to describe the situation. I doubt if there was ever a time in the history of higher education when educators could project past cost trends into the future and count confidently on finding the necessary funds. 'Crisis' in this sense is a normal situation for higher education; we are always faced with the necessity of securing a progressively increasing share of the national income" (p. 206).

This suggests that higher education has, does, and probably always will have to deal with fiscal stress, but that claims of crisis suggesting the need for major policy discontinuities are clearly overstated. Even if they were true, it is unlikely that colleges could do anything about it. Resources available to colleges and universities in the future probably will be related more to growth of the overall economy than to public confidence or any specific reform activities or programs that might be developed by institutions (Hauptman, 1993).

The Chronic Crisis of Confidence

Proclamations tell us that "public esteem and support for higher education appear to be declining" (Association of Governing Boards, 1996, pp. ix, x). Higher education's loss of confidence is now conventional wisdom, despite the fact that most of the evidence is anecdotal rather than systematic, and what systematic evidence there is does not appear to support the claim (Prewitt, 1993). Confidence was declared to be eroding in 1969 as part of a triple crisis (Ward), and at a low ebb in 1970 (Sherriffs). In 1970, just about everything was causing public anger, including: "student alienation, irrelevant curricula, uninspired teaching, ironclad adherence to what may be outdated traditions, absentee professors, extravagantly high costs of research and graduate education" (Dunham, 1970, p. 1). Educators could point to "a serious erosion of public confidence" in colleges and universities that were once "the pride of America, and the envy of other nations" (Brubacher, 1972, p. 9). National surveys showed the percentage of respondents indicating a great deal of confidence in educational leaders dropped from 61 percent in 1966 to 33 percent in 1972 (Lahti, 1973, p. 1). In 1992 a confidence crisis was seen as "a storm breaking upon the university again" (Pelikan, 1992, p. 12).

But what the pundits say may not always reflect what the public believes. A 1982 nationwide survey reported that over 72 percent of Americans thought that the quality of higher education was excellent or good (Group Attitudes Corporation, 1984). In 1989, college or university president was the third most prestigious occupation in the United States, and college professors were seen as the tenth most prestigious on a list of 736 occupations (Prewitt, 1993). A 1994 national Gallup Poll found that colleges and universities were highly regarded by the public; two-thirds of the respondents who had attended college said they were satisfied or extremely satisfied, while only eight percent were dissatisfied (Gose, 1994, p. A63).

There is no doubt that levels of public confidence in higher education have declined, but this is part of a national trend to view all societal institutions more critically. Between 1964 and 1992, those having high confidence in college presidents declined from 61 to 25 percent. Still, only the military (39 percent) and the U.S. Supreme Court (31 per cent) had higher confidence ratings than higher education ("Poll finds low confidence in college presidents", 1992; Harris, 1994). A 1996 poll in Colorado showed that more respondents had confidence in colleges than in any other state-wide institution ("Poll shows that Coloradans are confident of state universities", 1996), and a comparable 1997 poll in California ranked public confidence in universities and colleges fourth highest among 34 different institutions (The Field Institute, 1997). A 1996 national survey found higher education rated either first or second in confidence among all public and private non-profit institutions (Independent Sector, 1996). In summary, although confidence in all social institutions has declined in recent years public confidence in higher education remains higher than

for other institutions. And there is a disconnect between the views of the elite and the general public. "A glance at the journals and newspapers covering higher education, or at the reading lists and journal of opinion makers, suggests that higher education is troubled" (Harvey & Associates, 1994, p. 1). At the same time, a survey of public opinion polls found that "the American people like almost everything about higher education" (Harvey & Immerwahr, 1995, p. 3). Certainly the public is concerned about higher education costs, and this concern is generating increased public scrutiny. But there is little evidence to support the claim that the general public is losing confidence in higher education, despite consistent claims by a small group of academic and other opinion leaders to that effect. "If we take the early 1970s as the base point, the level of public confidence in higher education has not measurably declined [as of 1993]" (Prewitt, 1993, p. 215). As a report issued by Columbia University stated it, "students keep enrolling, employers keep rewarding advanced studies, researchers keep making discoveries, and donors continue giving. Obviously the public believes that higher education has significant benefits" (Graham, Lyman & Trow, 1995).

The Chronic Crisis of Stagnation

There has probably never been a time in this century in which higher education has not been criticized for slowness of change. In 1969 it was stated that higher education could not cope with the rapid changes of modern life (Axelrod, Freedman, Hatch, Katz & Sanford, 1969, p. viii): "The social institutions serving our times are aging and have developed an unhappy rigidity that resists such examinations [of whether they are right for the times]; even the colleges and universities stiffen before the winds of change" (James, 1969, p. 221). The same sentiments are echoed today when Newt Gingrich reminds us that colleges and universities don't change, campuses are run for the benefit of faculty, the faculty are out of touch with America, and the administrators are ineffective (Gingrich, 1995).

But other voices refute the claim. An inventory of academic innovations in 1974 led the Carnegie Commission to say "the idea that colleges and universities have resisted experimentation with new structures and procedures is rendered almost obsolete" (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1975, p. 105). More recently, "sustained reform on college and university campuses is becoming prevalent and purposeful. Change is everywhere - in the classroom, across the curriculum, and in the ways that faculty define their roles and approach their tasks" ("Finding proof in the pudding: The viability of reform in higher education", 1997, p. 57). Change in higher education, although usually neither quick or dramatic, is constant. Course materials change annually with the development of new knowledge, and with the development of technology (Green, 1997). Individual institutions respond to environmental pressures by developing new programs and services (O'Keefe 1987). The degree of change is difficult to reliably quantify, particularly when looked at over short intervals, but campus surveys indicate that it is widespread (El-Khawas, 1996). While most changes are incremental, the cumulative effect over decades can be dramatic. As one example, because of continuing change and responsiveness to society's needs, the university is "no longer the site of homogeneity in class, gender, ethnicity, and race" (Levine, 1996, p. xvii).

It is difficult to support the critic's argument that higher education doesn't change, although whether it is changing quickly enough and, more to the point, whether it is changing in the directions desired by the critic, is another matter. Some crises are claimed when "the self-appointed guardians of the public good, those who know best, are always just a little nervous about markets when they do work, because, in fact, we don't like the results very much." (Rivlin, 1988, p. 9). The problem is illustrated in the recent culture wars. One camp has argued that the curriculum hasn't changed quickly or widely enough to reflect the needs of students and an increasingly diverse society, while the other has argued that it has changed too quickly, eradicating the best of what has been thought in the past. In curriculum development, as in policy making, where you stand depends on where you sit.

Crises and Attention

The strong rhetoric and vivid images of crisis are useful tools with which to gain attention, power, and control of organizational and symbolic processes in a noisy world. The rhetoric of crisis does not seek to further analysis, but to promote action (Eccles & Nohria, 1992) and advance the priority of an issue on the always overcrowded public policy agenda. (Birnbaum, 1988). A "rising tide of mediocrity" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) , a "disturbing and dangerous mismatch" between what higher education is providing and what society needs (Wingspread Group, 1993),or "a time bomb ticking under the nation's social and economic foundations" (Commission on National Investment in Higher Education, 1997) may carry more weight than rational discourse, particularly when the general public knows little about higher education (Immerwahr & Harvey, 1995), and data to support the crisis rhetoric are either selectively cited, or non-existent.

Claims of crisis can focus attention on the particular ideological interests of the claimant (as when a prominent politician connects "The Coming Crisis in Higher Education" to a host of conservative initiatives (Gingrich, 1995, pp. 217-222)), or certify the status of the claimant as a prescient seer in warning that time is running out - a reflection of what Hofstadter has called the paranoid style (Hofstadter, 1965). Leaders may proclaim a crisis as justification for increasing their authority, for making changes that might not otherwise be palatable to constituents (Tucker, 1981), and for coping strategically with shrinking resources (Kerchner & Schuster, 1982, p. 121). A crisis claim may be constructed in such a way as to favor one kind of outcome over another as solutions search for problems to which they might be applied (Cohen & March, 1974). Studying a problem and proclaiming it a crisis (as did the congressionally created National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education) may serve as a form of socially acceptable symbolic action and as a substitute for the more difficult task of initiating instrumental activities. But while crises may be claimed to gain political advantage, it would be a mistake to think that such claims are solely Machiavellian or manipulative in nature. Many - perhaps most - claims of crisis are part of good-faith efforts to improve society. Crises are social constructions, so that belief in the existence of a crisis is related to the ideology of the viewer. At the same time, there are natural cognitive processes of nostalgia, selective memory, and vivid recall based on recency, that may facilitate the perception of crisis, regardless of the nature of the ideological issues involved.

In all spheres of social life, there may be a tendency for the past "to recede into a benevolent haze.... The dirty business is swept under the Carpet of Oblivion... If we compare this purported Arcadia with our own days we cannot but feel a jarring discontent, a sense of despair that fate has dropped us into the worst of all possible worlds. And the future, once the resort of hopeful dreams, is envisioned as an abyss filled with apocalyptic nightmares" (Bettmann, 1974, pp. xi, xii-xiii). A college president commenting on the good old days said "we who lived through them find them good because we conveniently forget what we do not care to remember - and you, because you never lived through them, can find in the unknown the things the known has denied you" (Hilberry, 1943, p. 11). Those who see crises in higher education may be seduced by the ahistorical "myth of the Golden Era" (Millard, 1991, p. 21) in which the present situation is unfavorably contrasted with the false memory of a fabled past.

Past problems, having been resolved, fade from memory; current problems seem even more intense because of the cognitive tendency to give prominence to more recent events. When American higher education was enjoying prosperity in the mid 1980s, for example, "the funding 'recession' that had occurred in the early 1980s largely had been forgotten, and the hard times at the beginning of the decade were little more than a memory" (Breneman, Leslie & Anderson, 1993, p. xi). In contrast, contemporary problems are deeply etched and easily brought to mind. No wonder the problems of today appears more vivid and intense than the half-forgotten terrors of yesterday. The nature of today's circumstances can be given even greater emphasis because of the natural cognitive tendency to "project short-term circumstances into long-run laws of development" (Kerr, 1975, p. 273). The Commission on National Investment in Higher Education (1997), for example, supported its claims of a catastrophic shortfall of funding by the year 2015 on just such projections of current trends which suggested that state tax funds for higher education could drop to zero in the year 2036 ("Still headed for zero: Decline in state tax funds appropriations for higher education paused in FY1998", 1997).

Crisis is related to change, and change always seems to be more rapid in the contemporary era than in our memories of the past. But the immediacy of the present always leads us to feel under pressure from what we believed to be an increased pace of change. In the 1950's business managers expressed the same perceptions of rapid change that we assume is unique to our present situation. "When one examines the historical literature, one is surprised to find that change - indeed, transformative change - has <u>always</u> been a common theme" (1992, p. 20), and "every leader or manager views his or her era as especially provocative" (1995, p. 86). Why is this so? Mintzberg has argued that we are in no more crisis now than in the past half-century, but that "we glorify ourselves by describing our own age as turbulent. We live where it's at, as the saying goes, or at least we like to think we do (because that makes us feel important).... In other words, what we really face are not turbulent times but overinflated egos" (Mintzberg, 1994, p. 207).

<u>The Pandemic Crisis and Attention to Resources</u>

The primary purpose of a crisis is to justify claims for the allocation of scarce social resources. Claims of crises can be used to politically advance an argument for the internal allocation resources (as when a university information system administrator states that "25 percent of higher

education institutions in this country will be out of business 20 years from now" because they won't be able to adapt to technology (Young, 1997, p. A29), as well as for increased external support (as when a commission calls on the nation to address the fiscal crisis by allocating additional public resources to higher education (Commission on National Investment in Higher Education, 1997).

The scramble for external resources increases as new and competing social priorities emerge, each with its own claims of crisis. The situation in higher education is made to appear even more desperate because, in common with many other non-profit organizations, the unbounded institutional quest for prestige, excellence and influence means that no institution ever has enough to do everything it wishes. As Bowen's law of higher education states, "no college or university ever admits to having enough money and all try to increase their resource without limit" (1981, p. 20).

Chronic Crises and Attention to Narrative

The chronic crises of higher education are created by disagreements over the core questions of higher education's purposes, relationship to society, and decision processes. Different constituencies construct stories, or narratives, about who should go to college, what should be taught, the social obligation of institutions, the proper way to make decisions. Since these are questions of values rather than facts, perceptions of public confidence and judgments of institutional success are influenced more by ideology than data. As the stories of some groups become dominant, the stories of other groups become marginalized. These narratives "are stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end, involving some change or transformation. They have heroes and villains and innocent victims, and they pit the forces of evil against the forces of good...." One of the stories is "the story of decline, not unlike the biblical story of the expulsion from paradise..... The story usually ends with a prediction of crisis" (Stone, 1988, p. 109). Stories of the adulteration of the canon, threats to quality, or the fading of collegiality are examples of claimed higher education crises based on the narrative of loss. Because there are so many possible narratives, "it is difficult to predict which national problem will be successfully turned into a major national educational crisis and which will not" (Meyer, 1986, p. 50).

The social construction of a crisis is part of an interpretive process in which contending ideologies vie for supremacy through the offering of competing narratives. Dominant narratives cannot be displaced merely by presenting arguments or data refuting them, but only by providing a different narrative that tells a better and more compelling story (Roe, 1994). One way of making a story compelling is to exaggerate it, connect it to important social values and symbols, and propose solutions that "appear to be in the public interest, or natural, or necessary, or morally correct" (Stone, 1988, p. 122). A crisis may be, in Berliner and Biddle's (1995) memorable phrase, a "manufactured crisis," but all claims of crisis, being constructions, are manufactured. Problems that may lead to crises are "not given, out there waiting in the world for smart analysts to come along and define them correctly. They are created in the minds of citizens by other citizens, leaders, organizations, and government agencies, as an essential part of political maneuvering" (Stone, 1988, p. 122) . Different groups have different narratives. When a group identifies something as a crisis, it is attempting to gain acceptance of its narrative in competition

with other narratives. A crisis exists for us when the other's narrative gains ascendance; the crisis can be resolved if our own narrative gains ascendence, but this at the same time creates crisis for the other. This iterative cycle of claimed crisis based on competing narratives is a natural consequence of the policy process in a pluralistic and diverse society.

Discussion

Our historic faith in the effectiveness of education leads us to "turn perceived national problems into educational crises and reforms" even when "the crises may seem spurious to the observer, and the educational remedies far-fetched" (Meyer, 1986, p. 47). The goals of higher education are ambitious, and while its achievements and contributions to the development of individuals and to society as a whole have been amply documented in general (see, for example, Bowen 1977), there is no agreement on how they can be assessed in specific cases. Educational institutions "cannot achieve all the things we want from them, and they cannot satisfy all the expectations we have of them. And the more important our goals for the schools are, the more intense the criticism is likely to be" (Levin, 1998).

There is little evidence for contemporary claims of unusual crises in higher education, and those that claim them tend to rely on "facts" that are "typically anecdotal, often referring to contemporary events that are the focus of a great deal of interest and uncertainty. The empirical evidence, when collectable, is rather slippery. For every graph that can be used to suggest that we are in a unique moment of total upheaval, there is another, equally persuasive one that suggests the world is practically steady-state" (Eccles & Nohria, 1992, p. 27)1988:10}. To say that colleges and universities today are in crisis is to simplify to the point of absurdity an extremely complex and dynamic relationship between higher education and society. The claimed existence of such a crisis is a myth which has been sustained as "the unproved assertion becomes 'documented' through the sheer force of repetition" (Levine, 1996, p. 24). Claims of crisis are created by ideology, tricks of memory, and an ahistorical view. The Carnegie Commission's 1967 statement that "a crisis is approaching" in higher education (p. 2) itself echoed statements of a hundred years earlier, and repeated regularly since then. Edmonson (p. 16) in his 1932 presidential address "The Newest Crisis in Education" suggested that while every few years seems to bring higher education to a critical situation, "that we are not facing the first crisis is an important fact to be kept in mind." The stability in the number of claims of crisis shown in Table 1 demonstrates the validity of Edmonson's view, and suggests that crises come and go in partially predictable cycles.

Even though claims of crisis may come from outside the academy, we often sow the seeds of crisis ourselves. Noting the mass of critical literature in the 1980s, Prewitt (Prewitt, 1993) reminds us that much of it comes from academics themselves: "it is often members of the university community who are confessing to all who will listen that the university stands guilty of fraud and failure" (Prewitt, 1993, p. 207). Small numbers of critical faculty members write articulate, and in many cases newsworthy, critiques, perhaps in response to "the masochistic need that is perhaps [academia's] most prominent common personality trait" (Kerr, 1975, p. 273).

These are transmitted to opinion leaders, whose views ultimately influence those of the general citizenry. Thus we have a curious paradox. The elite are critical, while the general public strongly supports higher education. Higher education pays a price for the "negative tendency of some academics when they comment on the situation of higher education...to see only the worst aspects." The solution? "Their views need to be discounted" (Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, 1980, p. 13).

Declarations of crisis can have both positive and negative consequences. From a positive perspective, it has been said "the first characteristic of policy-making is the need for a crisis. In higher education, as in other areas of public policy, the American political system seems unable to engage in a serious debate about policy change - let alone to undertake action - unless some form of doom is widely felt to be impending" (1988, p. 7) Thus "sporadic reform by major crisis" (Hefferlin, 1969, p. 3) may be an expected and essential element in overcoming the inertia of institutionalized organizations and fostering adaptive change in complex, self-correcting systems. At the same time, what are the costs? Can calling out "crisis" in a crowded postsecondary world have negative consequences? Have the continuing claims of crises themselves reached a crisis point?

Focusing on a fatally flawed present and an apocalyptic future makes it increasingly difficult to consider the possibility that "the American academic world is doing a more thorough and cosmopolitan job of educating a greater diversity of students in a broader and sounder array of courses covering the past and present of the worlds they inhabit than ever before in its history" (Levine, 1996, p. 17). If something is labeled a crisis, then everything connected with it may be seen from a negative perspective. The general public may be unduly alarmed and make personal decisions based on problems that don't really exist. Those who think that tuition is out of reach, even when it isn't, may be persuaded to alter their educational plans. Policies based on misinterpretations may be illogical and counterproductive (Jaschik, 1988). Just as a crisis may serve as a call to arms and an invitation to action, it may also provide a counsel of despair and a self-fulfilling prophesy in which we become captives of our own rhetoric. Too frequent declarations of crisis may reduce the credibility of those who claim it (Kerchner & Schuster, 1982), and the invocation of idiosyncratic crises (of parking, of accreditation, of academic freedom) tends to debase the word altogether. Claims of crisis, and the actions that may follow from them, may usually cause only minor mischief, but have the potential for greater consequences as passion and ideology leave little room for measured analysis, and strident advocacy contributes to growing cynicism and hopelessness.

To identify something as a crisis requiring special attention and resources may be functional when discrepancies between actual and desired performance reach intolerable and unstable levels which place a system at risk. However, our review suggests that claims of crisis in higher education persist even when these discrepancies are absent (or at least not explicitly evident). On balance, we believe the problems we face now are not much different than the problems of the past, each of which has been overcome, and that no fundamental changes in processes, programs or structures are needed to deal with current problems. As Clark Kerr said almost a quarter century ago, "higher education has been and is going through a time of troubles, but it is more

likely that it will survive and surmount the challenges it now faces than that it will decline and fall....To those who see only gloom and doom, we can say that much good is also occurring. To those who say everything fails, we can say that much is, in fact, succeeding. To those who see only problems, we can say there are possibilities for their alleviation" (Kerr, 1975, pp. 271, 275). Because of its unusual organizational properties, and the impossibility of clearly defining its processes and goals, higher education will always be in a state which some will refer to as crisis, even as it is "thriving and is perhaps stronger and more effective than ever before in its history" (Trow, 1986, p. 171).

In his farewell speech upon stepping down in 1996 as the president of the American Council on Education, Robert Atwell said "this time the wolf is real. Unless we shift course and do it soon, many of us will be swept away" (Fisher, 1997, p. 50). Is there really a crisis this time? After all, even the economist who predicted 8 of the past 3 recessions was sometimes right. Is the scratching sound we hear outside the academy's door a wolf waiting to devour Grandma? Or is it only the pussycat asking to come in from the cold for the night?

We lean toward the pussycat hypothesis, and we are concerned that unwarranted cries of "wolf" may eventually provoke yawns rather than attention and action. As both educators and the public become inured to the crisis claims, real signals of incipient threat may become indistinguishable from the background noise of the familiar crisis language. To call something a "crisis" may transform an important problem, that might be ameliorated through thoughtful incremental improvements, into a politicized jeremiad whose fanciful and unfeasible recommendations are a recipe for inaction (see, for example, the 1986 claim by the National Commission on the Role and Future of State Colleges and Universities that "nothing short of a creative state-by-state effort to strengthen education at all levels, comparable to the Marshall Plan in scope, cost, and dedication, can ensure the preservation of our democratic legacy for the twenty-first century"). As scholars of elementary and secondary education crises have recognized, "the trouble with such messages is that they can lead to quick-fix or damaging 'solutions' for minor distresses and to ignoring the truly serious problems of education and American society that need long-term effort. People can become blase when critics cry educational 'wolf' too often" (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 144).

Are there serious problems in higher education? Almost every observer would agree that there are, although there is no agreement on their nature. Is there a crisis in higher education? Probably no more so than there has ever been. Comparing critical assessments of the schools over the past decades, Levin suggests "the issues of 1957 are also the issues of 1997, suggesting that criticism is eternal - and perhaps by implication, not very meaningful" (1998). As they say in the bayou country, plus les choses changent, plus careste la meme. In times like these, it is good to remember there have always been times like these. Higher education is likely to continue on our unpredictable, bumpy road as we jostle back and forth, trying to make sense in a confusing world, and using as our lodestone a Utopian ideal that can never be achieved. It is a natural and expected characteristic of the political process in a democratic society. Still, we shouldn't need crisis to improve. As Alice Rivlin said "I don't perceive a crisis in higher education, but I don't think we need one to reassess periodically the strengths and weaknesses of our system, to readjust

policy, to strengthen the weaker elements, and to carry on the whole enterprise. We should get over the need to feel that things are going to hell and we can't do anything to make them better" (Rivlin, 1988).

Table 1. Rank order and percent of specific higher education crises cited by at least five percent of references in five year periods, 1970-1994

Rank	1970- 1974	1975-1979	1980-1984	1985-1989	1990-1994	All Years
1	Finance 33%	Finance 29%	Finance 27%	Finance 16%	Finance 28%	Finance 27%
2	Student Unrest 11%	Confidence 7%	Enrollment 8%	Curriculum 10%	Diversity, Equity 10%	Confidence 6%
3	Stagnation 8%	Leadership, Governance, Management 7%	Confidence 6%	Diversity, Equity 10%	Confidence 8%	Curriculum 6%
4	Confidence 8%	Stagnation 7%	Curriculum 6%	Stagnation 6%	Stagnation 6%	Stagnation 6%
5	Leadership, Governance, Management 8%	Diversity, Equity 5%	Literacy, Writing 6%	☆	Curriculum 6%	Diversity, Equity 6%
6	Curriculum 5%	Literacy, Writing 5%	☆	☆	Values, Morals 6%	Leadership, Governance, Management 5%
Balance	27%	40%	47%	58%	36%	44%
N	168	191	146	115	179	797

☆- No category with over 5 percent of citations

Appendix 1
Higher Education Crises Cited in ERIC CD-ROM
1970-1994

	Years																								Total	
Crisis	70	71	72	73	74	75	76	77	78	79	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	n	%
Finance	6	19	16	10	5	20	10	10	11	2	9	7	7	9	7	3	3	3	6	3	3	11	11	13	12	216	27
Confidence	1	6	2	2	2	5	3	4	1	1	1	2	1	5	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	4	3	3	3	51	6
Stagnation	1	3	3	3	4	5	4	2	1	0	0	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	4	1	0	4	2	50	6
Curriculum	0	2	1	1	5	0	0	2	9	1	0	3	1	2	2	4	3	2	3	0	3	2	1	3	1	51	6
Academic Area[1]	2	3	0	3	2	8	6	5	9	2	4	1	9	8	9	2	5	6	9	8	7	8	4	9	3	132	17
Lead/Gov.	4	3	1	2	3	6	6	1	1	0	0	1	2	0	1	1	1	0	0	3	1	0	0	2	1	40	5
Student Unrest	5	7	1	3	3	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	21	3
Diversity/Equity	0	2	0	1	2	1	2	2	4	0	2	0	2	1	0	0	1	0	4	6	4	5	0	3	6	48	6
Quality	1	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	1	1	3	0	15	2
Values/Morals	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	6	1	1	15	2
Tenure	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	10	1
Literacy/Writing	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	5	0	3	2	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	20	3
Enrollment	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	0	1	0	4	0	4	1	2	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	19	2
Other[2]	2	4	3	6	4	9	5	5	7	2	6	1	3	2	5	5	3	7	1	5	3	5	3	6	7	109	14
Total	22	50	28	34	34	60	39	34	50	08	32	20	34	29	29	21	20	19	27	28	27	39	29	47	37	797	100

[1] Crises noted in "academic area" section include a variety of disciplines and subjects within the university community such as opera training, engineering, mathematics, history, Jewish studies, medical education, graduate education, biological sciences, library sciences, Germanics, and English.

[2] Crises noted in "other" include, among others: technological advancement, deferred maintenance, publishing, faculty shortages, academic freedom, libraries, student debt, accreditation, parking, mass higher education, liberalism, student attrition, legal issues, admissions, community colleges, federal involvement, collective bargaining, city universities, research, student aid, Ph.D. employment, student personnel identity, external doctorate programs, and athletics. None was cited more than 5 times in total, or more than 3 times in any five year period.

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Endnotes

1. The enrollment crisis was one of the few for which consequences were quantitatively predicted. According to the 1997 Digest of Educational Statistics FTE enrollment did not decline, but actually increased 17 percent between 1980 and 1995 (Snyder, Hoffman & Geddes, 1997)

2. An addition category, "Academic Area" also meets these criteria. However, we have not included it as a chronic crisis because it is a composite category made up of specific disciplinary and professional areas whose claimed crises have no common theme.

3. The 1997 Digest of Educational Statistics, Table 243, (Snyder, et al., 1997) indicates the number of institutions and branch campuses closed annually during the period 1969-1995. When grouped in five year intervals, the number was 114 in 1969-73, 57 in 1974-78, 29 in 1979-83, 75 in 1984-89, and 121 in 1990-94 suggesting that 1969-73 and 1990-94 had similar rates of closures (although there was a significant drop in closures in the period between these years). Further analysis indicates that almost half of the closures during this 25 year period took place in the small and vulnerable sub-population of private two-year institutions. When only four-year colleges are considered, the number of closures during the 25 year period is remarkably stable, with a high of 49 for 1969-73 and a low of 23 in 1979-83. Closures of four-year institutions in 1990-94 was 38, which was lower than the rate in 1969-73.

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